

## REVIEWS

65

Kononenko, Natalie. *Ukrainian Epic and Historical Song: Folklore in Context*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Acknowledgements, Introduction, Illustrations, Notes, Bibliography, Index. xiv+330. \$85.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-4875-0263-8.

Natalie Kononenko's latest foray into the traditional songs of Ukraine draws readers into the history of mendicant bards, their traditional songs and the culture-history contained within them. The work ostensibly focuses on epic songs (*dumy*), but genre boundaries (which are never so clear to begin with) are forsaken here to a higher cause. While most specialists will argue with the claims made about the novelty of the theory supporting this work (p. 41-43), the true innovation here lies in formatting and presentation. Rather than categorizing the *dumy* and other songs into corpora or genera and isolating them into stock, numbered lists, Kononenko has inventively opted to embed the songs into a historical treatise focused on the lives of the common people who were largely the singers and subjects of the songs. The resultant book presents a Wolfian social history on the lives of *Kozaks* (an intentional fresh spelling of the familiar word [p. 18]), blind bards, and peasants, garnished with the songs whose content and context dictate the flow of the narrative. It is a refreshing and engaging format which will no doubt be repeated by others in future publications.

With the songs as guides, the chapters explore the history of the *dumy*, as well as their singers, subjects and collection. Chapter one focuses on the history of the study of the *dumy*, outlines their general tone and character, and discusses their (predominantly thematic) relation to other oral epics. Chapter two explores the history of the genre itself, the social context which birthed and fostered the art, as well as the lives of the bards (*kobzari* and *lirnyky*) who sang them. From here the book enters into a focused overview of the historical circumstances that undergird the subject-matter of the songs: the Turko-Tatar slave trade in Ukraine and the role that bondage or its threat plays in the songs (p. C3); the historical and social conditions that spawned the *Kozaks* (p. C4), and their later formalization under the leadership of Bohdan Zynovyi Khmel'nytskyi (p. C5); as well as the daily conflicts and family strife of conventional life in the period after Khmel'nytskyi's death ('The Ruin') that influenced the most popular songs of the 19th century (p. C6). The book concludes with an epilogue that begins as a personal reflection by the author on the role that epic songs have played in her own life, but continues into some very thoughtful consideration about the purpose of epic singing and the psycho-social role that it plays in society.

The historical material presented throughout the book is focused and comprehensive while remaining digestible for the lay diaspora audience at whom the text is predominantly aimed (p. 40). Readers are given a solid overview of all the necessary topics without being over-burdened with dense terminology or theory. This is not to say that scholars will not appreciate the linkages provided between the historical contexts and their nuanced echoes in the songs. At times these historical surveys are very comprehensive, particularly discussions of the social structure of the Turkish slave trade—including some highly insightful and

pointed discussion on the role of language in the integration of slaves into Ottoman society (147-9)— (p. C3), Kozak maritime warfare (p. 192-205), and the history of the Khmel'nytskyi Uprising (p. C5). The work is also peppered with allusions to modern film interpretations of the songs as well as reflections on the history and folklore surrounding Russian and Soviet efforts to suppress them, all further testament to the breadth and depth of ways in which Kononenko has engaged with these traditions through her career.

For those predominantly concerned with the song translations, the book offers beautiful, contemporary English-language renditions of one multiform of all 33 dumy found in Kateryna Hrushevska's 1927-31 collection, as well as 16 historical songs, five ballads and seven sundry minstrel songs. Eight of the songs presented (six begging/religious songs and two historical songs) are drawn directly from Kononenko's 1998 book *Ukrainian Minstrels and the Blind Shall See* with minor emendations to the translations; the rest are novel to this text. For those who cannot access the dumy in their original language, it is a pleasure to find here four multiforms of songs published in the author's earlier work which serve well for comparative purposes.

There are some small issues with the text that stand out: Many of the English-language terms could use glosses (I found myself wondering, for instance, which Ukrainian word has been replaced by the English 'duke' on pp. 186-91) and the text is not free of minor errors. The inclusion of the Babylonian myth, the Enûma Eliš, in an overview of oral and written epics feels misplaced (p. 24) and one can only wonder why it was necessary to tell readers which dumy collections the author owns copies of (p. 38-39). On a more fundamental level, one feels at times that the strong adherence to a cultural-historical approach in this work falls short of providing a complete understanding of the songs. Kononenko has done a fantastic job of addressing the shallower historical 'fossilizations' (p. 41-42) of fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Ukrainian experience that were retained in the dumy, but has opted not to plumb deeper levels that she is well acquainted with for the sake of a simplified approach. One is reminded of David Bynum's criticism of early proponents of such research: many oral traditional tropes simply have much deeper roots than the cultural milieu in which they are found and efforts to ground them with only one group (as cultural practice or detritus) must be forced. Speaking horses (p. 180-181), unsuspecting heroes dressed in rags (p. 172-175), and heroes felled in foreign wars who are described by compatriots as having married foreign maidens (p. 113-114) are all reduced in explanation here to specifically Ukrainian phenomena, when all appear in a wide range of Eurasian epic traditions and other lore. In fact, every one of these tropes is very common in South Slavic epos and presents fertile grounds for comparative research. A critical use of such folklore insights would not detract from the book's aims, but rather enhance them by revealing Ukrainian bards as local artists in a grand tradition. These criticisms, however, will likely not concern the average reader who will find in this book a careful handling of the complex historical events and conditions which lend necessary context to the dumy so adeptly translated here.

The text is bound in a beautiful, crimson cloth and the University of Toronto Press has bequeathed it an eye-catching Kozak depicted on the dust jacket. The quality of the binding and the reasonable price mean that the book should find a ready home in the libraries of both scholars and enthusiasts. Those Ukrainians in diaspora who look to the *dumy* as, in Kononenko's words, 'talismans' (p. 7) of their cultural identity will find in this book a fuller and renewed appreciation for dear and familiar traditions.

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